Like branches growing into the sky

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Like branches growing into the sky

by CatRoofDance

Summary

"In my hands the knife, I twist it between my fingers. The light falls out of the headlamps of my car and floods the ground. Above me the night. The young woman disappeared between the lines and chokes on her own desperate cries. I laugh and realise how strange I became to myself."
Will Graham is not a murderer. He just feels like them. But things change and one day he wakes up in a foreign wood and can't remember how he got there. Surprisingly Hannibal seems to know all the more...

Notes

Let's have a word before we start!

Hannibal once traveled the alps with elephants. This is not that Hannibal. This is the Hannibal who eats people. Not in this fanfiction, but he still does it.

This is also a story about Will Graham who doesn't eat people. But it's still not funny. It's very graphic and dark and twisted and bloody and there is sex as well. So beware! But in the end there will be summer and some warm air. I promise. And till then you can leave this story whenever you like.

If you watched the series you know that this is serious. It's beautiful and frightening at the same time.

If you haven't seen the NBC series Hannibal yet you should give it a try if you don't have a problem with gore and blood. Especialy if you like amazing actors, intelligent writing and stunning pictures. It's true! But of course you're allowed to read that fanfiction even though you're no fan of Hannibal. There is not much to know about it, actually. Hannibal is a cannibal and a well-educated bastard. He likes to smile smugly. And Will Graham...well.

This is a trilogy. All three parts already exist but I only translated this first one (I'm German, you know).

In the end there is nothing left for me to do then give you this tracklist I made for this story.
https://8tracks.com/catroofdance/like-branches-growing-into-the-sky

Have Fun. And come back safely.

I She falls out of the thicket and on her knees and doesn’t pray to god

Like branches growing into the sky

I She falls out of the thicket and on her knees and doesn’t pray to god

0

He asks how long I’ve been having these dreams. I sway my head, pretend to not know the answer, act like I actually had to think about it. I don’t want to say “for a while now” or “some weeks maybe” or “I don’t know”. I don’t want to lie again, don’t want to say something I’ll later regret.

I don’t say anything. I watch Dr. Lecter as he clasps his hands. And then I stare out of the window. We stay silent until the rain stops and then I leave.

1

She’s wearing a blue dress. I don’t know her name, around us everything is black. A light cone behind us illuminates our feet, mine in dark heavy boots covered in wet soil, hers bare and bright against the ground.

Behind me the stag lifts his head, he exhales, a wheeze, and then breathing air swirling in white clouds into the sky. Hooves on asphalt, antlers branch out into the darkness. The animal isn’t casting a shadow.

Wait, I say and the young woman shakes her head in disbelieve as if she were unable to understand what I mean. She backs out, her eyes are big in her face, staring at me. I break eye contact. Behind her lays the forest, black vertical lines towering and fanning out over the sky. The darkness is thick and dirty and grabs her ankles. She stumbles into the thicket.

In my hands the knife feels sessile. An extension of my arm.

I don’t follow her, just gaze after her until the blackness finally swallows her. I can hear her breathe in panic, I see the letters ascend and break. I walk along the edge of the forest, slowly, gradually, and listen. Something vibrates in my ears. *Wait,* I repeat. I don’t get an answer.

In my hands the knife, I twist it between my fingers.

The light falls out of the headlamps of my car and floods the ground. Above me the night. The young woman disappeared between the lines and now chokes on her own desperate cries. I laugh and realise how strange I became to myself.

Suddenly I sit behind the wheel of my car staring at the few metres of road that lighten up before me as I drive through the night. The forest lays silent to my right. I imagine her struggling through the darkness in her blue dress, still believing in survival. She cries and shouts and curses and cries. She twists her ankle when she gets caught on a root, the thorns of low-growing blackberry bushes flay the skin from her shanks, her toes go numb in the coldness of the moist forest floor.

The knife rests on the passenger seat reflecting the dashboard. The time in digital numbers is back-to-front. One blink of an eye and an hour disappears.

The stag is standing in the rear-view mirror.

When she breaks out of the undergrowth - falls out of the vertical lines and bruises her knees - I'm already waiting for her. I tell her how stupid it was to head for the only light source. I tell her how easy it was to cut her off, and she just dizzily nods her head. Blood runs down her shins. I can hardly make it out between the red stripes of scratched skin.

I need three steps before I can take hold of her. I need one hand to crab her and pull her head back. She's now breathing in sniffs as if the air became thick and hard to swallow. Her body is shaking. Her mouth is agape, her lips are pale curved lines, brittle. I can hear her thoughts, every single prayer to an invisible god, every pleading and begging for her life, each of her void and desperate sentences.

And finally she surrenders. Her muscles relax, she closes her eyes, her arms fall feebly beside her hip. *No prayers*, I say, *no last words.*

Then I cut her throat. The knife leads me, drags with a keen blade through the skin, separates atom by atom, skin layer by skin layer until blood trickles over my fingers. It feels cold and smells of dampness. I pull her head back even more until the cut is a black gaping mouth. Blood flows down into her stomach. Eventually it's over.

Minutes later when she's lying on the ground in front of my car she still bleeds patterns into the blue dress. Macabre Rorschach pictures. I tease the fabric on her back apart with one single cut and peel the dress from her skin.

Her body is empty and immaculate, that's why I fill it with words. I trace every single letter, push the tip of the knife deep into the dead flesh until my fingers hurt. After that I carry her back into the woods but only a bit. I lay her down into the blackberry bush where the thorns put full stops behind my words.

In my hands the knife feels out of place. Like a tumour growing out of my finger tips.

When I get the water cans out of the boot and wash away the blood from the street, the stag bends over me. And his antlers grow right through my body and into the darkness which already splinters at the horizon.

2

You wake up lying in your bed. The wind pushes the curtains inside, sun beams fall through the gaps into the room. You remember your dream. You rub your hand through your face. Eventually you get up and walk to the bathroom, you have a wash and afterwards you look for some clean clothes. You have breakfast. You don't have breakfast. You feed the dogs, they watch you leave the house.

This is a normal day.

And then you wake up and the air is damp. Dry fir needles are sticking between your fingers, the branches above you are shaking in the breeze. It smells of moist soil. Birds are living in the trees crying. You're shaking, you try to sit up and stare into the fog that adheres to the ground. You can't remember. You don't know where you are. You gaze into the sky behind the branches and later you rub the dirt from your hands. Your car is waiting at the roadside, you drive home. Panic overwhelms you on your porch.

This is not a normal day.

3

"You look tired, Will", he says standing in the door frame, and then he walks over to the desk, his feet silent on the parquet. I stare at his shoes, at his fuzzily tied shoe laces and the edge of his trouser leg. The air in the lecture hall vibrates and hums inside my ears. I just nod.

I don't remember anything. Not the evening nor the night nor how I ended up in the woods. I still smell the fir needles on my fingertips. Dr. Hannibal Lecter stands in front of my desk, bends over it a bit, his arms crossed behind his back, and I know he smells it too, each short green bit, each aromatic particle. I don't look up. I stare through his body and twist my fingers in my lap.

I say: "I'm sleepwalking again," and he nods as if I gave the right answer to a question that was never asked.

"It's the inner conflict that makes your body restless. Your mind struggles and instead of sleeping and resting you keep wandering around. Have you thought about visiting a sleep laboratory and have some tests carried out?"

Hannibal Lecters accent is like background noise, I can't place it. Instead I'm thinking about every single word until the sentence makes sense in my mind. I slowly sway my head.

"No," I say, and then once again, "No. Sleeping is difficult enough for me. I don't need some scientists watching over me while I role from one side of the bed to the other."

He shows something like a faint smile. His tie sits so perfectly centred that I can't avert my gaze.

“Will,” my name sounds strange, “You need sleep. You seem distracted.”

I woke up in a foreign wood. Above me the branches.

“I could prescribe you something. To make sleeping a bit easier.”

Something has been blue. Something has been red.

“Yes. Yes, maybe that’s a good idea.”

I do my best to look him in the eye. But pupils are difficult. To look at something that itself watches is almost impossible for me.

“Fine,” Dr. Hannibal Lecter says and knocks on the desk like sealing a pact. And then: “Will, your hands.”

My fingertips smell of fir needles. Blood sticks under my fingernails. I look at it until it blurs in front of my eyes.

Something has been red. I can’t remember. And Hannibal Lecter leaves the room as silently as he entered it.

4

“When I empathise with a murderer I eventually reach the point where I understand him. Where I can comprehend why he did it. That’s right before I think I actually am the culprit. Before I forget my own identity. It’s…frightening. I mean, knowing that it’s wrong to kill a human being, to abuse and to destroy a human life and at the same time to *understand*. I *know* why he did it.

And then I imagine myself doing it. Cutting the flesh. Breaking the skull. Beating, kicking, biting. And suddenly…I am him. Suddenly I’m looking down on myself and I am a different…person. And in my head there is nothing but one thought. That one reason for the murder. The fury or the hate or…the love.

There was never a murder where I didn’t think for a split second: *It had to be done. There’s no other way.* And that is the worst moment.”

I don’t expect her to understand this. Alana still nods. But this time it’s not enough for me. I need more than that. I need more than a motion of the head, more than a shrug and curling lips. More than a pad on the back that says “It’s alright” and “I feel you”. Because it’s a lie. Everything is a lie.

I want to say *I’m disappointed, Alana.* Why is nobody here like me? Why is my brain so much bigger and more complex and dangerous than yours? Why can’t I be mediocre? Normal. Boring. Mundane.

I can’t even tell anymore what normal means. Normal is a state I’ve long forgotten exists.

Alana nods and I'm tired of seeing people nod. I look past their eyes because pupils are these black dots that shouldn't distract me but they do. And then I shout at her long enough that she apologises for something she never did.

Alana. There has been something blue. I cut it with a knife. But I can't remember what it was. And now there is blood on my fingers.

What should I do? What should I do?

What.

5

"No crime scene today," Jack says and hands me a file. We dig out an old case instead, something that dates back so far that I imagine everything in black and white. "There is no statute of limitations for murder", he says when I ask him for a reason but I know there is more behind it. He crosses his arms in front of his chest and leans back on his chair while I leaf through the pages.

The called him the Collector of Austin. He collected tattoos, not on his own body but on other people's. He cut them out of his victim's skin, most of them survived but some, especially the ones with huge back tattoos, didn't. They never caught the Collector himself but one day they found his museum. Inside a nuclear shelter build for World War III each piece of skin was preserved in formaldehyde. There are hundreds of photographs, all in this file.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, "Chances are the culprit died long time ago. It's been ages."

"Why do we collect things, Will? Things that obviously don't answer a purpose. Stamps, bottle caps, coasters, perfume flasks?"

The pictures are old and feel rough. Like touched by many hands.

"Order. Sorting. Keeping track of chaos. By sorting and classifying things that belong together we win power over them. We make them ours. We own them and they operate on our principles."

Jack sways his head. "Control," he murmurs, "it's always about control."

"Because most people don't have it," I say and Jack laughs.

"Nobody has it." He's right.

Bright skin and dark drawings. Simple lines that reveal a picture or a symbol or a name. I peruse every single photograph.

"Should I really solve this case for you, Jack?" I ask and Jack shakes his head.

“Alana told me you need to be kept busy. I thought I give you something new.”

A rose. A heart. A dragon. The name of a girl, crossed out and replaced by another one.

“You know, you’re probably right, the bastard is long dead. Yet another one that escaped us.” He shakes his head, again.

A skull. A swastika. I figure holding a gun to its own head.

And then a stag. I hold my breath, my vision blurs at the corners. His antlers branch out, forming a mesh of twigs splintering at the peaks. The animal’s fur is implied with a few short strokes, his hind legs barely visible, too faded is the colour on skin. His eyes are dark round dots and they stare at me. I think the stag breathes.

Jack bends over my shoulder, sees me lightly touching the photograph. “This is the oldest. The first tattoo.”

Pale strokes on brittle skin. The stag lowers his head and his antlers grant under their own weight. Breathing air clouds. Glowing eyes in headlights. Then in the rear-view mirror.

“That’s where it all began,” I mumble.

And some day it will end.

II In the woods there is a hole in the ground, that’s where I buried them both

Chapter Summary

> Will doesn't know what happened in the forest, he only knows there is a knife missing in his kitchen. And so does Hannibal Lecter.

II In the woods there is a hole in the ground, that’s where I buried them both

6

You’re standing in your house, looking at the floor. The pictures repeat themselves in your head. Green to blue to red. Vertical lines losing themselves upwards. Between them the stag who lifts his head when you lower yours.

There is a knife missing in the kitchen, the long one, the shining one. You search every drawer, first slowly and calmly, then again and again until you empty them on the parquet and cut your fingers on the blades. Panic inside you. Fingers in hair. Fingers on skin. Breathe, breathe.

You’re standing in your living room and your dogs are sitting around you so quietly, looking up at you. Your house seems vast to you. You try to remember what you did, smell the blood under your fingernails even after you scrubbed them red while trying to get rid of the colour.

You scream. You slam your fists against the door. The dogs cock their ears, they follow your frantic footsteps with their heads. And then you look outside to the street at your car and you become really quiet. You remember the blue dress. Your fingers around the knife’s handle. The blackberry bushes.

You want to cry but instead you’re just blinking into the sinking sun, flooding your house with warm air. You’re breathing. Something feels good inside of you. You just hope it’s not your heart.

7

We stay silent while Dr. Hannibal Lecter fills in the prescription. His writing is fine and curved, his signature, untypical for a doctor, legible and clear. A capital H stretching out downwards, ink soaks into the white paper and defibres at the edges.

I know the drug because I know all the drugs that are meant to give you a dreamless and quiet night. Everything with an X and Y at the end. I know all the shapes of the pills and I know the little letter engraved. I took them all, sometimes individually, sometimes altogether, sometimes so many I lay on my bed paralysed the whole night, starring at the ceiling and counting how many heartbeats I had until I could move again.

What must it be like falling asleep and waking up again without thinking about it?

Hannibal Lecter slides the prescription over the table at me, then he leans back in his chair. I take the piece of paper and stare at the letters, fold it after a while and shove it into my pocket.

The curtains are closed as usual, red-grey-red, behind them somewhere, daylight. It's always dark inside here but the air is fresh and clear. I look up to the books whose spines my fingers have already stroked. Most of them have French titles, some are works of German psychiatrists, names I can't even pronounce and titles I don't understand even though some of the names seem familiar. Up close the bookshelf smells of ink and leather and dust.

The statue of the stag is standing behind me. Motionless.

"Where did the blood under your fingernails come from, Will?"

Something freezes and defrosts again when I turn around. Dr. Lecter got up, spreads his right hand onto the wood of his desk, puts his other hand in his trouser pocket. I blink with irritation, cock my head and avoid his gaze. He smiles.

"You don't remember?"

One day it begins and one day it will end. I wonder how he knows. Am I a book? Am I one of the opuses in his shelf, can he open me up and read inside me? Am I written in a language I don't understand?

"It was...one of the dogs. Got caught in the neighbour's wire-netting fence. Cut his flank open."

Hannibal Lecter nods. "Animals tend to panic when they realise they can't move anymore. The smell of their own blood maddens them. Almost as much as the blood of another animal does."

I can't interpret his smile, it's too light, just a gentle curling of his lips. His fingers on the wood don't move, he stares at my hands, at the plasters under which I hid the cuts.

Then he says: "Did you find the knife?" and I launch at him and push him backwards until his spine hits the wall. My fingers are tightly grabbing his suit while he just smiles and smiles, and I spit my words into his face.

“Why?” I ask and: “Don’t do that to me. Don’t provoke me.”

Please.

Hannibal Lecter grips my arm wrists but doesn’t try to push me away. He looks at me and my pupils twitch away from him again and again. He says: “You will remember it. The details will come back eventually, piece by piece. And then you will understand. After that everything will be easier. But the first death, that takes time.”

His fingers on my skin are burning. I pull away from him and stumble backwards, stare at him in disbelief while he straightens his jacket and then crosses his arms behind his back.

“Will,” he says but I shake my head.

“I didn’t do it. It was a dream. One of those damn visions, they seem so real that I can feel the pain even after waking up. But none of this was real!”

For a long time we just stand in front of each other saying nothing. I concentrate on breathing because suddenly I seem to have forgotten how it works. Outside the rain thrums against a window that is invisible because it’s hidden behind thick curtains. The house, the wood is grating in the cooling air. Somewhere a clock is ticking.

“She wore a blue dress,” I silently say and swallow, “I don’t know her name. I don’t know who she is. Who she...was.”

Hannibal’s hand on my shoulder feels heavy. I don’t draw back anymore. We poise for some minutes. Eventually I excuse myself and leave. I have the prescription filled and later I take three of the grey pills and wait for sleep to come.

8

The sky is a dark blue, below the sharp line, black where the field isn’t lit-up. Behind me the woods, trees like stripes, between them bushes and fern and thorns.

I have been here once before. I got into my car and just drove off and this is where I stopped. Behind me are the outskirts of a village, lights inside windows, street lamps casting bright cones downwards, between them sharp street corners.

How stupid of you to head for the only source of light.

I think of pale skin stripped from flesh by thorns. Dead eyes, dirty hair. I did this. This is my design. I can’t remember who the young woman was, I don’t know where she came from. But I know how she nodded and how her arms sunk beside her hip, devoted, no prayers anymore, don’t, not a word about God or the Lord and the Holy Spirit. Don’t. Don’t.

I curse, I scream, a long pained scream that disappears into the woods. I claw my fingers into my scalp, I want to pull out the thoughts. Want to grab the dead flesh and shake her body and ask why I did it. Is this the end? Is this the moment I break?

And they all nod and nod and nobody is ever giving me an answer. I've always been a time bomb, a matter of days and hours until I eventually explode. Because I understand how they feel, these people who put their hands around someone's neck and squeeze. People who fire guns and watch the bullets break through flesh. People who punch someone's face again and again till their own knuckles hurt too much from trying to break bones with bones. I can understand all that because I feel it with every fibre of my body.

Until now it always felt like I was being someone else, not me, not Will Graham but Hobbs or Miller or Waters. The Collector or the Ripper or the Phantom. But not this time, I think and stare into the big and wide and dark night sky, because this time it *didn't* felt like the hands of another person or the eyes of a stranger. This time they were my own.

The stag pants behind me, he is still far away impatiently pawing the asphalt. Suddenly I wish I weren't alone.

Dry branches creak under my boots when I enter the forest. I push the brushwood away and see broken twigs where my own hands probably touched them nights before. I smell the needles and the odour of foul berries mixed with the fading warmth of the day. I follow my own tracks and remember every step that I took that night but not the How and Why.

Under a fir with branches fanning out wide and swallowing most of the light the soil is grouted and flattened at the edges. I inhale through my nose and still seem to suffocate.

I remember digging the hole in the second night. Lifting her body out of the blackberry bushes and throwing her down. Scooping back the soil.

Hooves crushing the undergrowth. Antlers rubbing against tree barks, I don't turn around. I feel the breath at the back of my neck, sense the memories returning and I understand. I feel again what it was like wielding that knife.

There is a corpse lying under me. And behind me someone breaks through the thicket, pushes branches aside. At first I hear hooves but then it's just footsteps.

"Kessy, that's the dog's name," I say. "I had her for a while, she was one of the first strays I found and gave a home. She was already old back then, fourteen maybe. One morning she was dead, just like that, fell asleep and never woke up again. I buried her in the garden."

Hannibal behind me shoves his hands into his pockets. "How did you feel?" he asks calmly as if this wasn't a forest and we weren't standing in front of a grave.

"Sad, actually. As if burying a sister. Alana...Dr. Bloom once said the dogs were my way of creating a family. Maybe she was right."

He takes a few steps towards me, I still don't turn around, and then he stops as if there was an unspoken law for the exact space between us. I think of his hands on my shoulders. I think of

his eyes and his perfectly tied tie.

“How did you feel when you buried the young woman, Will?”

“Empty,” I say. And then I think back looking at my fingers. “I felt nothing. I already used up all my emotions in the moment I cut her throat. After that it was over. Everything was cold. Everything was dead.”

“What did you do?”

In my head pictures are merging into each other. Silhouettes peter out in the corners of my eyes and become completely black. I stutter the first few words, stop and start again. “I carried her...into the woods, left her there. The next night I unearthed Kessy. She wasn’t buried for long, she just began to rot. I brought her here and then I dug the hole. The young woman’s corpse is right at the bottom. Then comes soil. Above that the dead dog.” I breathe in deep. Close my eyes. “And then soil again.”

“That was very clever of you, Will.”

I can’t help but laugh. When I turn around and see Hannibal Lecter standing there in dim light the twigs behind him form antlers. They blur the longer I watch them. The wind carries rustling from the undergrowth to us.

“With a bit of luck nobody will ever find that corpse. I’m a coward, Dr. Lecter, not like you.”

He suddenly smiles with such a smug intensity that I want to break his jaw. I clench my fist, unclench it again. Somewhere nearby an animal howls, Hannibal turns his head in the direction of the sound and I see his profile.

“I could never be like you.”

“You think?” He lifts his eyebrows, I can hardly see it in the twilight. “Well. Maybe not yet. But you made the first step. Some day it begins.”

“And some day it ends.”

“Of course,” he says. I can see his teeth standing white in his mouth while he laughs. I can’t recall seeing Hannibal Lecter laughing, ever. He asks: “Since when do you know about me?”

“Longer than I want to admit. I think I knew it for a while but looked away on purpose.”

“Because you fear me?”

“Because I admire you.” I enjoy his astonishment but only for a short while. “What is happening here?” I ask and rub my eyes until I see stars in the darkness.

“It’s like waking up, Will.”

No matter how long I think about it, I can’t find an answer to that.

9

Jack Crawford stares at you while you bend over the corpse. You watch yourself thinking. The victims become faceless to you. The culprits become heroes for just a few seconds until someone tears you away and brings you back.

You think of your own murder and how easy it became to ignore the guilt and panic inside you. You look over to Alana Bloom who is wearing flowers on her dress as if it was her duty, and you manage to smile at her. In your head you're talking to yourself about death and your entity and waking up.

You don't want to understand why you killed that woman. This is the last border. You want to wash your hands clean and forget. But still, there is a grave in a foreign piece of the forest, and inside there lies a dead dog. And something blue.

You can't remember the words you carved into the skin.

The murderer Jack is looking for is lonely and in his mid-fifties. You give them everything they need to know and then you return to the lecture hall. The students there are watching you mesmerised while you avoid their gazes. You read in their body language that they heard the rumours, that they read every article about you. Each time they called you a psychopath or lunatic.

Maybe it's true.

You don't look them in the eye because glances, you were never much good at glances. You pack your bag, put all the notebooks and files between the leather and then you stare at your hands and suddenly you realise that you have no idea where the knife is.

Later they will say Will Graham had a fit again. The truth of the matter is that reality just descended upon you.

III Body against body, we're holding the same knife to each other's throat

Chapter Notes

I totally forgot there was another chapter missing. I lost all my documents for a while and yesterday I got them back and while sifting through all my texts I realised I didn't translate the last chapter.
Sorry for the wait. But here it is.

III Body against body, we're holding the same knife to each other's throat

10

In my head the scene plays backwards. It begins with my body against his, our lips pressed together, the same air in our lungs. It ends with the moment I enter his kitchen. Everything in between is in the wrong order, completely random. Blurred, frayed.

I ask: "Where is the knife?" and he says: Will, I can't possibly know that.

It smells like herbs and onions in butter, and I don't want to think about the content of his fridge, not now. He wears the apron over his shirt, no tie, it's the first thing I notice. His hands are in thin latex gloves, in front of him, on the cutting board, are several chili peppers and their seeds. Something in the kitchen is silently vibrating, probably the oven.

He asks: "Will," while he's slowly taking off the gloves, "am I your psychiatrist?" and nothing shocks me more than the personal, private manner in which he utters the question. I lean back against the counter, there's oil fizzling in a pan next to me. And I just shake my head. And then I want to nod after all but decide against it because there are enough people in my life always nodding their heads.

"I can't do this anymore!" I shout and Hannibal keeps cutting the chili peppers into small, thin stripes and then pushes the seeds away with the edge of the knife.

We have invisible blood on our fingers. We press against each other and feel the other's heartbeat pumping through our veins. How strange it is to feel life under naked skin, life that actually grows stronger instead of fading out and dying.

"It's your first murder, Will, you need time. You're just starting to understand what it means. Don't panic."

"This is exactly what I mean." I can't stop shouting. "How you talk about it, like it's something that's happening every day. Your confidence when you're talking to the profilers. God, how you talk to Jack Crawford! How you sit in front of him and smile at him while he's talking about the murders you committed. How did he not see the pride in your eyes, all those year?"

I wonder what my lips taste like for him. I wonder if he'll want my heart and lungs one day. I push his shirt up a bit and underneath his skin is pale and cool under my fingers. He grips the back of my head and presses me harder against his mouth. It feels like a motion he has been planning for a long time.

"Is all of this your doing? Was that your idea?"

"Nonsense." He almost looks offended. "That's all you, Will. It's in your head, your essence. I just saw it before you did. Because I'm like you. Because I already went through all of this."

"I can't-"

"You must!"

The stag is standing in the door that leads to the living room, its antlers scratching over the wooden doorframe. Too tight, it can barely turn its head. We're snake and mongoose in the kitchen, frozen, motionless.

"If...you're not my psychiatrist what else are you?"

He's hardly hesitating. "A friend."

I understand. Then I move. Body against body.

We drink coffee like normal people. Alana to my right, Jack across from me. They didn't find the lonely murderer in his mid 50s yet, maybe he doesn't even exist. Sometimes people just die, break down in a place no-one will ever find.

I burn my tongue and stare into my cup. Alana laughs about Jack's jokes and keeps touching my upper arm. More flowers on her dress. I want to push her fingers away because it's too much for me, instead I concentrate on the flickering of the skylights, on the students passing the office, the humming of the coffee machine next to us. I can feel the pulse beating against my throat. My hands tense, clawing at the cup.

I say "Yes" and "Hm" and "I don't think that covers it actually" and then I cough and shake the vertigo out of my head. Everything is slow motion. A smile exposing the teeth, eye brows slowly rising, wrinkles forming under eyes. Laughter creates speech bubbles slowly drifting to the ceiling.

"Enough!"

For a second everything stops before heads are turning, looking at me, looking through me, counting the seconds with me.

"Will-" Alana says but I raise my hand. I stand up, ready to leave. She follows. The corridor somehow gets narrower at the end, the walls freeze over while I pass them.

Alana smells like the flowers on her dress. Like the fruits that are pictures on her shampoo. She lifts her hands and throws words after me but I don't stop to pick them up. In my chest my heart beats against muscles and bones and it feels heavier with every second. I don't know what it is that makes everything worse. It gets darker and grey, even in the spots the sunlight paints onto the floor.

"What's happening? You're so pale, Will. God, you're shivering." Her hands on my forehead startle me, I flinch backwards, my thighs bump into my desk, spilling a glass of water. With shaking fingers I take off my glasses and rub my eyes and I try to tell her to leave. I fold my hand into a fist and press it against the wood. I stare at the floor, to the ceiling, at my shoes, everywhere but her or the flowers or the pattern the air around her body formed.

She offers me some tranquilizers and I ask her if she's bringing a straitjacket as well. She doesn't understand why I'm laughing. She just flinches when I push the half-full glass over my the edge of my desk to the floor where it shatters. Then she slowly retreats as if she was afraid I would suddenly jump forward and grab her throat to squeeze or to dig my fingers into her flesh to pull out the muscles while she tries to cry for help. I would decorate her corpse with flowers, I would cover all the blood with petals. And if I were Hannibal I would lay her out in front of everyone. I would present her and give a lecture about how the murderer worked. Everyone of us thought about murdering someone, dear listeners, and this here is the work of a genius.

I open my eyes without knowing when I closed them and Alana has disappeared. The auditorium is empty and I'm standing next to my desk in the half-dark. The spilled water is soaking through my documents. Forms dark spots on the open newspaper. Spreads over the

face of a young women smiling at me who in reality is buried under 6 feet of soil and a dead dog.

12

"I don't know how you do it. How you can be near him when it's you he's hunting."

Hannibal turns his head to me, the dim light outlines the edge of his cheekbone. I resist the urge to lift my finger to trace it.

"Nothing but practice. In the beginning I was as frightened as you are but I learned to suppress the panic. Confidence is a good disguise. Arrogance makes you almost invisible."

I sigh and look up to the dark paneled ceiling above the bed and fold my hands on top of my bare chest. I smells like dust and warm air in Hannibal's bed room. Here are even more shelves, more books but no subject literature but instead old classics, first and special editions, misprints. Some of the thin booklets are welded in.

Why do we collect things, Will?

"I know what you're thinking, Will. Will they find the woman? Maybe. If certain factors come into play. Will they find out that it has been you who killed her? No. You're too smart, you didn't leave any evidence. There is no connection between you and that woman. There is so reason to assume you're the murderer."

A car passes in front of the house, the sound grows louder at first before it disappears around the next corner. I inhale and relish the oxygen in my lungs before I exhale again.

I say: "The knife. I lost the knife."

"The knife is my cutlery drawer downstairs. Cleaned, disinfected and, I might add, sharpened."

I nod. Downstairs hooves are clicking on parquet, branches of antlers rubbing against tapestry. But the stag is calm, is only slowly wandering through the room.

Hannibal props himself up on one arm and leans over to me. He slowly takes my glasses off before he kisses me. At first he's very soft like he expects me to stop him but then he becomes more fierce until our teeth click against each other. I reach for his shoulders while his fingers trace my hipbones, then the muscles on my stomach and finally the skim over the thin skin over my throat. Every touch is so light I sometimes wonder if I imagined it. My vision flickers, I close my eyes.

I don't say his name when he enters me, I just open my mouth a bit, exhaling. He presses his hand above it, the other one grabs my hair and pulls my head back. I can feel the pain from my scalp radiating down my neck, I bend my spine inwards, push my chest against his. We pause for a moment before we start moving, his hand still covering my mouth, the lack of air

making me dizzy. But I don' resist. Not even when he grips my skin harder, when he pushes me down into the mattress and presses into me.

I think about how he killed all those people with these hands and nothing about that frightens me. I breath in his smell, this mixture between soap and salt, and I can feel my spine under his fingertips.

Later he's standing next to the bed tying his tie. I blink sleepily, my body paralyzed, I can feel the bruises growing over my body.

"What if I tell Jack the truth about you?"

He's smiling at his own reflection, turning his collar down.

"I would kill you, Will. But unlike all the others I killed I would actually feel sorry for seeing you die."

"This should probably make me happy."

"Probably."

I can't muster up the strength to smile. My body weighs heavily on the mattress, it smells like sex and washing powder. I don't know when Hannibal leaves the room, I just fall asleep.

13

You dream about holding the knife against his throat. Pushing him against the counter and grabbing his wrists, then his chin. You hiss threats into his ear. Behind you the fridge is humming.

You found the knife in the drawer, you don't ask him where he got it. Suddenly you realise you're part of a plan of a mad man.

"Am I more than just a cog?" you scream at him and he can barely move his head because the blade would cut the skin over his throat.

You can hear the stag smashing the table in the dining room, hooves trampling wood till splinters rain against the walls. The rage in the next room is the same as in your chest. You feel used and you're not thinking about the bruises on your skin.

"Why?" you ask, again and again, but he isn't answering, just silently watches you with amusement. You don't want his smile anymore, you want to punch it out of his face. What is holding you? What's stopping your from dissecting him, from breaking him down limb by limb, tendon by tendon, and eventually, molecule by molecule? The blood would first fill a glass and then a pool, and his muscles would be red lines on the kitchen floor. You want to break his anatomy. You want to divide him, again and again to eternity, until his parts are so small they become invisible. Until he comes undone and vanishes.

But you hesitate, you keep him at distance with your knife and watch him laugh. And finally he says lifts his arms and he says your name, "Will" he says and he asks you to calm down. He asks you to breathe, he asks you to stay. He promises the truth and an explanation. And again and again the promises that everything will be alright.

I swear, Will, everything is going to be alright. The two of us, we're going to be ok. We're going to be amazing. I swear.

And after minutes and hours and days you finally believe him.

14

The sun is standing high, the grass is grayed out and dry. Cicadas are sitting in the trees, singing lazily. Sometimes the wind brushes through the cottonwood trees in the garden and pushes the curtains through the open window into the house. The dogs are sleeping in the shadows of the porch. The heat is slowing the world down, distances me from reality, makes me blink dizzily into the sky.

There are several unread letters in my mail box, I unplugged the phone months ago. Just once Alana stood in my garden, it was still winter, and tried to talk to me. But at one point she understood that is was over and she left without any words of goodbye. Sometimes I wonder what she told the others.

Gravel crunches under the wheels of a car, I can hear the handbrake being put on. I smells like ripe wheat and burning hay in the distance. When Hannibal pushes the fence gate open the dogs raise their heads and stare at the figure in the sunlight. Eventually they get up to approach him and he throws them some bits of meat they swallow without hesitation. Then he's standing in front of the porch and looks at me. I stood up for him but I don't dare to step out of the shadow, as if my skin would blister when touched by sunlight.

"How long has it's been?" I ask, my voice rough from not talking for a long time.

"Two additional dogs, if I counted correctly."

"They don't have names. I can't be bothered with naming them when they'll die anyway in the end."

He takes the two steps to get to me, reaches for my wrist and lifts it in front of his eyes. Slowly he skims over the pale scar across the artery with his thumb. I never told him the story about this but I guess he already knows.

"Can I come in?"

They never found the dead body in the woods. Neither the dog nor the unknown woman. America is huge, there is enough space to commit your first murder and to never be found

out. They never found the body and I never told Hannibal what the words were I carved into the woman's skin again and again.

He drops my hand and I turn around, open the door and disappear inside. And he follows me into the dimness, pushes the door back behind him where it falls shut with a click.

Someday I will tell him that it was his name, again and again, carved into every inch of pale skin, like a mantra, a prayer to a god that doesn't exist. That it was meant to be a gift.

But until then I will stay silent and watch the stag disappearing into the fields. He shed his antlers and now it puts down roots, climbing upwards, black against the light blue. Like branches growing into the sky.

And the fields are burning in the distance.

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